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Commentary Series

7:55 a.m. and 5:55 p.m. Weekdays on VPR

Great thoughts: George Perkins Marsh and conservation

Tuesday, 11/19/02 12am

LISTEN (3:13) [MP3](#) | [Download MP3](#) - Great thoughts: George Perkins Marsh and conservation

By [Tom Slayton](#), Montpelier, VT

(Host) Great thoughts and philosophies from Vermonters have shaped our state and sometimes influenced the nation. The ideas of George Perkins Marsh influenced Vermonters and the nation to think differently about stewardship of the land. According to commentator Tom Slayton, Marsh is considered to be a founder of today's environmental movement.

(Slayton) George Perkins Marsh, one of this state's early native geniuses, was born in 1801 and grew up as Vermont was inadvertently ruining much of its best farmland. As a boy in Woodstock, Marsh saw farm fields ravaged and rivers filled with silt as the soil leached from bare hillsides and was swept away. The cause of this widespread destruction was deforestation. Most of Vermont, like most of New England, had been cleared of trees to create more cropland and pasture and the result was devastating.

Marsh knew firsthand the effect that human beings could have on the land because he could see it himself, every day, in the bare hills and eroded fields around him. And he cultivated, along with his passion for books, history, and learning, a life-long interest in the natural world. Growing up in Woodstock, Marsh was at the center of a town filled with intellectual ferment because it was, from its earliest days, a prosperous commercial center and the Windsor County seat, and because many of its residents were intellectual Quakers and freethinkers.

Marsh quickly rose to prominence in Vermont, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and later became a diplomat, serving as a foreign minister to Turkey, Greece and later Italy. In those jobs, he traveled throughout the Mediterranean basin and saw, once again, the impact of humans on the natural world. People unknowingly made the desert environments of the Middle East worse and turned once-fertile areas into new deserts through heedless farming practices and deforestation.

All these observations seethed and percolated in his intelligent mind, and what resulted was an extraordinary book, entitled *Man and Nature*, published in 1864. The book put forth a new and radical doctrine: Human activity impacts and often harms nature. Marsh declared that for humanity to thrive and prosper, it must learn from the laws that govern nature and abide by them.

Such a proposition hardly seems radical today. But it was completely new when Marsh uttered it, and it turned out to be of stunning importance. *Man and Nature* inspired the first wave of conservation legislation in America: the 1873 Timber Culture Act, the Adirondack Forest Reserve in New York State, and ultimately the creation of National Forests. Because of his vision and deep understanding, but especially because of the book *Man and Nature*, Vermonter George Perkins Marsh is a bona fide intellectual pioneer, a founder of today's environmental movement.

The one problem with *Man and Nature* is that Marsh's Victorian-era prose is dense and hard to read. Fortunately, Stephen Trombulak, a professor of biology and natural studies at Middlebury College, has helped remedy that problem by carefully editing the conservation writings of George Perkins Marsh for the modern reader. His recently published book, *So Great A Vision*, makes the thought of this Vermont pioneer clear and accessible. Every environmentalist should be grateful.

Tom Slayton is editor of Vermont Life magazine. Learn more about the [Great Thoughts of Vermont](#) commentary series.

More from **Commentary Series**



Henningsen: An Honorable Man

Tuesday, 07/19/11 7:55am

Few of us know anything about Richard H. Poff, a former Virginia congressman and state supreme court justice, but historian and commentator Vic Henningsen thinks that more of us should.

Hanna: The Social Animal

Monday, 07/18/11 5:55pm

If you're looking for some summer reading that might change how you see yourself and your world, commentator and Vermont Law School professor Cheryl Hanna has a recommendation that might be of particular interest.



Guyon: Splendent Earth

Monday, 07/18/11 7:55am

Summer is a good time to visit your local museum or gallery, so commentator and art writer Annie Guyon is here with another of her occasional dispatches on Vermont's visual arts.

More from **Tom Slayton**



Slayton: Villages and Downtowns

Wednesday, 07/06/11 5:55pm -

The recent merger of two environmental organizations got commentator Tom Slayton thinking - about the importance of small towns and villages in today 's Vermont.



Slayton: Irasburg Affair Remembered

Monday, 05/02/11 7:55am -

As Vermonters read To Kill A Mockingbird, commentator Tom Slayton, reflects on one event in the 1960s that put Vermont's racial tensions in the national spotlight.



Slayton: Winter Pleasures

Wednesday, 03/09/11 7:55am -

Commentator Tom Slayton doesn't mind all the ice and snow we've had this winter. In fact, he thinks this is the way winter should be.